

# Mood



## DEFINITION

What is mood? Here's a quick and simple definition:

The mood of a piece of writing is its general atmosphere or emotional complexion—in short, the array of feelings the work evokes in the reader. Every aspect of a piece of writing can influence its mood, from the [setting](#) and the [imagery](#) to the author's [word choice](#) and [tone](#). For instance, a story that begins "It was a dark and stormy night" will probably have an overall dark, ominous, or suspenseful mood.

Some additional key details about mood:

- Every piece of writing has a mood—whether it's a masterwork of literature or a short haiku.
- Moods are established gradually over the course of an entire work, so it's often difficult to pinpoint the elements that contribute to a work's mood at the level of the sentence or paragraph.
- Mood is often (and understandably) confused with [tone](#), which is related but different in that tone refers to the *attitude* of a piece of writing, not its atmosphere. More on the difference below.

## How to Pronounce Mood

Here's how to pronounce mood: **mude**

## Mood Explained

Generally speaking, any word that can be used to describe emotion can be used to describe the mood of a story, poem, or other piece of writing. Here are some words that are commonly used to describe mood:

- Cheerful
- Reflective
- Gloomy
- Humorous
- Melancholy
- Idyllic
- Whimsical
- Romantic
- Mysterious
- Ominous
- Calm
- Lighthearted

- Hopeful
- Angry
- Fearful
- Tense
- Lonely

A single piece of writing can and usually does employ more than one mood, since different parts of the same work can have different moods, but works are generally characterized by a single overarching mood. So for instance, a story that has happy passages and sad passages might not be defined by either mood, but rather by its overall mood of humorousness.

## What Makes Up a Mood?

These are the basic elements that help determine the mood of a piece of writing:

- **Setting:** A story's [setting](#) is *where* and *when* it takes place. Setting is one of the first things to be described in a narrative, and therefore plays a major role in establishing the mood.
  - In the "dark and stormy night" example from above, the story's mood is established almost entirely by the setting (in this case, the weather and the time of day), which makes for a gloomy and potentially even frightening atmosphere.
  - A story that takes place in a cotton candy kingdom, by contrast, is likely to have a whimsical, cheerful, or lighthearted mood.
- **Imagery:** [Imagery](#) is similar to setting in the sense that it helps to establish mood using descriptions of physical things in the world of the story. Not every image in a work will be indicative of the story's mood, but images that are repeated or described in detail usually *do* reflect the mood.
  - A poem that spends a lot of time describing babbling brooks, gentle rolling hills, and herds of sheep might have an idyllic mood.
  - A story that has a lot of roses, candlelight, and boxes of chocolates might be trying to establish a romantic mood.
- **Tone:** [Tone](#) (or the *attitude* of piece of writing) is closely related to mood: often, the tone and mood of a piece are similar or the same.
  - It wouldn't be unusual for a poem with a somber tone to also have a somber mood—i.e., to make the reader feel somber as well.
  - A journalist who makes a jab at a politician might be conveying how they feel about their subject (using a critical

tone) while also trying to influence their readers to feel similarly—i.e., creating a *mood* of anger or outrage.

- **Diction:** The words that a writer chooses to use (i.e., [diction](#)) play a huge part in determining the mood of a piece, in part because different words that mean the same thing can have different [connotations](#).
  - A writer might choose to use more antiquated diction like "thou art" instead of "you are" if they want to create a whimsical mood.
  - Similarly, the difference between "a dull, uneventful night" and "a peaceful, silent night" might contribute to the difference between a text with a gloomy or melancholic mood and a calm, reflective mood.
- **Genre and Plot:** This one may seem obvious, but the genre and [plot](#) of a work contribute to its mood in many different ways. For instance, a murder mystery with many complicated plot developments and twists probably has a suspenseful or tense mood.

at all were out of the ordinary about the scene, contributing to the book's overall whimsical mood:

She stretched herself up on tiptoe, and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large caterpillar, that was sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

Even in her moments of discouragement, Alice manages to find a sense of wonderment in her surroundings:

"It was much pleasanter at home," thought poor Alice, "when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life!"

You could even say that, since the book's protagonist is a young child and the reader experiences much of the story through her eyes, the overall mood is "innocent" or "childlike." Indeed, Carroll's book can be thought of as a type of [allegorical](#) story that captures the way young children experience the world: with awe, wonderment, and joy. Not only does Alice experience these emotions—but, by extension, many readers do, too.

### Mood in Tennyson's *Ulysses*

Tennyson's famous poem is an excellent example of a work that establishes its mood quickly and effectively using just setting and diction. The poem begins:

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The mood of the poem is gloomy, melancholic, and reflective—which is reflected both in the poem's setting (still hearth, barren crags) as well as the poet's choice of words (the speaker describes himself as "idle," his wife as "aged," and his subjects as a "savage race" of hoarding strangers). The poem is written from the perspective of a hero reflecting on his life in old age, so the mood helps readers to have a similar emotional experience to the one the speaker seems to be having.



## EXAMPLES

The following examples of mood are from different types of literature: plays, novels, and poems. In each, we identify how the author builds the mood of the work using a combination of setting, imagery, tone, diction, and plot.

### Mood in *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#) is a play about death, grief, and madness (among other things). Shakespeare helps to establish the fantastical and ominous mood of the play early on by making use of setting, imagery, tone, and diction. The first scene takes place at night (setting), when three guards spot the ghost of Old Hamlet walking the castle grounds (imagery). But since it's a play, the mood depends almost entirely on the dialogue of the characters. The guards say to one another, "It harrows me with fear and wonder," and "How now, Horatio? You tremble and look pale. Is not this something more than fantasy? What think you on 't?" (diction). To the ghost, the guards speak animatedly and urgently, shouting "Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!" (tone). Shakespeare continues to build on and develop the mood of the play throughout, but he opens strongly with a scene that establishes the mood of the entire play as one of excitement and suspense mixed with fearfulness and dread.

### Mood in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll's [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#) has a whimsical, lighthearted, and often cheerful mood. It uses a combination of fantastical imagery, a famously "curious" setting, and lighthearted language to set the mood. In this passage, for instance, the narrator's description of the giant caterpillar makes it seem as though nothing



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Every piece of writing has a mood, but writers can use moods to achieve vastly different effects in their writing. In general, mood serves the following functions in literature:

- It enables writers to take their readers on a journey that is emotional in addition to being imaginary or imagistic.
- It helps convey the central themes of the work. For instance, a play about death might have a mournful or gloomy mood.
- It can help the reader identify more fully with the writer or characters by causing readers to feel the same emotions the writer or characters feel.
- It helps works of literature "come alive" by imbuing the language with human emotions.

- [Mood on YouTube](#): This short video gives a great overview of how mood works in literature.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

Kestler, Justin. "Mood." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved December 11, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/mood>.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Mood](#): A basic overview of mood in literature.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Mood](#): A simple definition of mood's general meaning.